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C O N F I D E N T I A L LILONGWE 000823

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SUBJECT: MUTHARIKA TO "OPEN DIALOGUE" WITH MUGABE

Classified By: Pol/Econ Officer Peter W. Lord, reasons 1.5 (b/d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) President Bingu wa Mutharika plans "to open a behind-the-scenes dialogue" with Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe during a August 26-28 trip to Zimbabwe. Mutharika, who will be in Zimbabwe to attend the annual Agricultural Society Show on August 27, is "concerned" about the situation in Zimbabwe because of its impact on Malawi, and he hopes to help "promote peace and security in SADC" through re-newed discussions. During his short visit, Mutharika has no plans to meet with members of the opposition. Minister of Foreign Affairs George Chaponda, who called the Western Heads of Mission together on August 23, said Mutharika wanted to explain his intention to meet with Mugabe to prevent any misunderstandings. END SUMMARY.

BRIEFING WESTERN MISSIONS ON MUTHARIKA'S INTEREST IN ZIM

2. (C) Minister of Foreign Affairs George Chaponda, flanked by newly-appointed MFA PS Lucius Chikuni and Secretary to the President and Cabinet Bright Msaka, told the Heads of Mission from the British, French, German, European Union, and American Missions at a meeting on August 23 that President Bingu wa Mutharika will discreetly meet with Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe during an August 26-28 visit to Zimbabwe. According to Chaponda, Mutharika, who will attend the annual Agricultural Society Show in Harare on August 27, set the private meeting with Mugabe during the recent SADC Heads of State Conference in Mauritius because Mutharika wanted "to open a behind-the-scenes dialogue" with Mugabe.

3. (C) Chaponda said the GOM, like the respective Western nations assembled at the meeting, is "concerned" about the situation in Zimbabwe. Chaponda noted the issues in Zimbabwe have an impact on Malawi because Zimbabwe is Malawi's second largest trading partner and is home to many Malawians. Chaponda said Mutharika's interest to engage with Mugabe is because Mutharika thinks that Malawi, as a member of SADC, has a role to play in the region's peace and security.

RE-ENGAGING MUGABE

4. (C) According to Chaponda, Mutharika wanted to explain his plans to open discussions with Mugabe so that there was no misunderstanding about his intentions. Chaponda also carefully noted that this initiative, although not entirely, was in response to demarches the UK and later the UK and EU recently gave regarding Zimbabwe. Referring to Malawi's previous initiatives, Msaka commented that engagement with Zimbabwe had waned since the December 2003 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Abuja and that Mutharika's meeting would be a way of re-opening the regional dialogue former President Bakili Muluzi began. Chaponda said Mutharika has no plans to meet with members of the opposition.

COMMENT

5. (C) The GOM has long been an advocate of behind-the-scenes dialogue with Zimbabwe, and, with the dust of the elections settling, Mutharika seems keen to pick up where Muluzi left off. While we do not anticipate much will come of this initial meeting, it is possible that Mutharika will later become an effective avenue of communication.

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